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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ALGIERS 000565

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [AG](#)  
SUBJECT: REALITIES OF RECONCILIATION CHARTER IMPLEMENTATION  
HITTING HOME FOR ALGERIANS

REF: A. ALGIERS 338  
[1](#)B. ALGIERS 365

Classified By: Ambassador Richard W. Erdman  
for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT  
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[1](#)1. (C) Influential segments of the Algerian public, assured by President Bouteflika last fall that voters were not approving a general amnesty for terrorists, are expressing serious reservations on its implementation after seeing prominent terrorists and FIS leaders returned to the streets and making public statements demanding a right to return to political activity. Sensing the public worry surrounding the mid-March releases of over 2,200 prisoners in implementation of the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation, top government officials including President Bouteflika, Prime Minister Ouyahia, and Interior Minister Zerhouni, after a week of unsettling silence, made public statements making clear that the Charter's ban on political declarations and activity by released terrorists would be strictly enforced. Among the released prisoners have been high-profile former terrorist Abdelhak Layada, a "regional emir" and number two of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), and prominent Islamic figure Ali Belhadj, former number two in the banned Islamic Salvation Front (FIS).

[1](#)2. (C) Initially, the size of the prisoner release, the inclusion of prominent former extremists, and the political declarations of some of these figures, contrary to the terms of the charter, shocked and worried many Algerians, especially the victims' families, who feared many would return to violence. The more general concern, however, is not that the former terrorists will take up arms in the hills again, though a small percentage may do so, but that the release of prominent radical Islamists could revive a political agenda dedicated to establishing an Islamic state. Following the high-profile government warnings and state security private warnings, public concerns have been somewhat allayed and the released terrorists have ceased overt political activity. Arguably, another positive factor is that, unlike in the past, the press and middle class professionals are reacting so quickly and widely at even the first sign of extremist Islamic political recidivism. That said, the concern remains; low-level protest demonstrations have continued, and many contacts fear released terrorists and FIS leaders are using the quiet to consider options and lay the groundwork for future political action. (End Summary and Comment.)

MAJOR GIA FIGURE RELEASED FROM PRISON  
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[1](#)3. (U) Abdelhak Layada, former "regional emir" and number two of the GIA, was released March 12 from prison in Algiers. Layada is the most senior member of the GIA, the bloodiest

of the Islamic groups that terrorized Algeria during the 1990s, to benefit from the limited amnesty given to former terrorists through implementation of the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation. Layada was arrested in 1993 for recruiting and training members of the GIA in Morocco and sentenced to death in 1994. The death sentence was later redacted after Algeria abolished the death penalty.

14. (U) A major figure in the GIA from January 1992 until his arrest in 1993, Layada was suspected of masterminding several bombings during that time, even though none of the allegations was proven in court. His release brought to the surface questions on the implementation of the Charter, especially among families who lost loved ones to terrorism.

#### LAYADA MET AT PRISON GATE BY PROMINENT FIS FIGURE

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15. (U) Upon his release, Layada was met by another Algerian Islamic figure of the 1990s, Ali Belhadj, the former number two of the FIS, who himself had been released several days earlier. Press accounts reported that Belhadj, along with family and friends, waited for Layada at the gates of the Serkadji prison. Belhadj accompanied Layada to the grave of Layada's mother, who died while he was in prison, and then to Layada's home.

#### PRESS AND PUBLIC REACT WITH SURPRISE AND CONCERN

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16. (C) The embrace of Belhadj and Layada at the prison gate, captured on the front pages of most newspapers in the country, shocked large segments of the Algerian public as much as the release itself. Conversations with Algerians

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from all walks of life indicate there is a sense of disbelief and anxiousness at the release of prominent extremist figures, like Belhadj and Layada. At a recent dinner hosted by Ambassador, for example, five of the six Algerian guests were deeply concerned by the sweeping nature of the releases.

A physician worried that extreme anti-human behavior has psychiatrically scarred released terrorists and made it impossible for them to reintegrate socially without psychiatric help. A civil society activist whose work takes her to villages and rural areas reported serious unease among the villagers. Since provisions of the implementing ordinances made clear (see reftels) that those held on charges of terrorism involving mass murder, rape, or detonating explosives in public places would not benefit from the Charter, Algerians tell us they cannot imagine who would not qualify for release in the aftermath of the decision to set free the notorious terrorist Layada. Belhadj has also pushed the limits of the ban on political activity for former members of the FIS by releasing several statements criticizing the Charter and stating his intention to resume political activity.

#### CHARTER REALITIES AROUSE PUBLIC CONCERN

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17. (C) The realities of implementing the Charter have begun to hit home for the Algerian public. Despite a claimed 85% voter approval for the Charter in September 2005, the release of over 2,000 former prisoners has made some Algerians rethink what national healing and forgiveness actually mean. A Presidential aide quoted in a leading French-language daily El Watan said, "I understand the pain of the families, the unfinished mourning, but the crisis spared no one, and the majority decided in favor of forgiveness." True, Algerians tell us, but Bouteflika assured the public during last fall's campaign that they were not voting for a general amnesty for terrorists. Peace may come at the price of justice, but the embrace at the prison gate, one Embassy contact explained, left the impression that former terrorists were free to walk

the streets and form new alliances, since Layada's GIA was never part of Belhadj's banned FIS. Layada's March 18 interview on Al-Arabia television where he commented on the National Reconciliation also led many Algerians to question what constitutes a ban on political activity under the Charter.

#### LOW-LEVEL BUT CONTINUING PROTESTS

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¶8. (SBU) During a March 12 protest rally by several families against his release in front of the office of the Prime Minister, Cherifa Keddar, president of the Djzairouna (Our Algeria) association said, "We refuse to forgive and forget. No one has the right to forgive, except the families of victims." Many of the demonstrators promised to protest every Sunday to show their disagreement with the implementation of the Charter. These demonstrations are continuing and reportedly growing in size. The March 26 demonstration featured posters with the faces of women murdered by terrorists.

¶9. (SBU) In a March 21 meeting with Ambassador, Ali Mrabet, head of the Samoud organization dedicated to serving the interests of the families of terrorism victims, argued that implementation of the Charter was contrary to the information the GOA had provided before the referendum, was illegal, and ignored the concerns of victims' families. Noting that he had written a letter to President Bouteflika to protest the release of terrorists, Mrabet said he "would prefer to live under a dictatorship than a democracy in which his views were ignored." He added that it was characteristic of Algerians to forgive as soon as forgiveness is requested, but Algerians do not forgive those who do not ask for forgiveness. Samoud, like Djzairouna, planned to organize demonstrations. In order to prevent the police from breaking up the demonstration planned for the next day, widows of slain police officers would be prominent in the group.

#### GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

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¶10. (U) In public speeches meant to reassure Algeria on the government's position on the implementation, Interior Minister Zerhouni said, "The red line (of the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation) is not to use religion as an instrument, and those who do cannot perform any political activity." Zerhouni continued, "the Charter was clear about (former members of the FIS) going back into politics; however, if they should be excluded, their families should not, for it is one of the foundations of the reconciliation not to leave anybody on the margins of society. Why should the terrorists' children pay for their parents' mistakes?"

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Prime Minister Ouyahia reiterated these statements in his March 21 press conference by saying, "When individuals are banned from political activity, they are banned from it, and the State should shoulder its responsibilities and will surely not tolerate any manipulation of Islam...going back to the chaotic situation of the 1990's will not happen". A few days later during a March 24 speech to an Algerian lawyer's association, President Bouteflika said, "I know that the wounds are still hurting and that the sight of a terrorist walking in all liberty hurts tremendously, but on reflection, I understood that the solution was not eradication (of the terrorists). Eradication is one of the weapons used to fight terrorism but in precise and clear conditions. The struggle is social, cultural and economic in order to avoid the crumbling of our society." He also made clear that implementation of the Charter would be done in a way that would promote security as well as social peace.

¶11. (C) The GOA architect of the National Reconciliation, Farouk Ksentini, told Ambassador March 22 that he had met for

more than an hour with Belhadj. Alluding to a difficult encounter, Ksentini remarked that Belhadj "now understood" the limits the Charter imposed on his activities. Ksentini also remarked to PolEc Chief that "the word was being passed" to lower profile individuals released under the Charter, presumably a reference to home visits by state security personnel.

#### ISLAMISTS AT THE GATE

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¶12. (C) Embassy contacts have reported seeing Islamists waiting outside prison gates throughout the country during prisoner releases. The Islamists, according to these sources, have been on hand to offer moral support, reintegration assistance, and jobs to the former prisoners. One policeman reported that he saw an Islamist giving released prisoners envelopes containing 5,000 Dinars (US \$60). According to several Embassy contacts, the Islamists operate large networks in contraband goods, including cigarettes and clothing. This contact expects many of the prisoners to take jobs from their Islamic brothers instead of seeking governmental assistance under the Charter in reclaiming jobs they lost prior to their arrest.

ERDMAN